

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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HD **Shaena Lambert's novel Petra looks into the fire and passion of eco-activist Petra Kelly; Petra, the latest novel by Shaena Lambert, follows feminist eco-activist Petra Kelly, who founded the German Green Party in the early 1980s**
BY Emily Donaldson
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Petra (Penguin Random House), the latest novel by Shaena Lambert, is about the feminist eco-activist Petra Kelly, who after founding the German Green Party in the early 1980s, went on to lead the fight against the placement of nuclear missiles in West Germany – at the time, ground zero for a global resistance against the nuclear arms race. The highly charismatic Kelly became lovers with a married German general, and this singular odd couple – peace activist and military leader – were drawn into a web of love, jealousy and, ultimately, violence when both were found shot to death in their bed in 1992. Lambert's previous novel, *Radiance*, and two books of short stories, *Oh, My Darling* and *The Falling Woman*, have been nominated for multiple prizes, including the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. She lives in Vancouver with her family.

Why did you decide to write a novel about Petra Kelly?

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I would never have done it if I hadn't met her. In the 1980s, when I was a peace co-ordinator for a city-wide festival, we flew her in to speak at the Orpheum [in Vancouver]. She absolutely riveted me with her passion, her fire, and her take-no-prisoners agenda for a better world. Brilliant speaker. Hard to describe that mix that creates a charismatic person – but she had it. And forever tagging behind her, during that trip, was her German general lover, who seemed the quiet, rather odd antithesis to all that passion. It was only years later, though, while I was standing looking at her photograph in a small museum at Checkpoint Charlie, which honoured people who'd fought to free political prisoners in the East, that I thought – I've got to write about her. By then she was dead. I wanted to know why. What combination of forces had killed her? So the seed fell into me that day. The novel writing seed.

And yet despite that charisma, I think it's safe to say that few people would recognize her name in North America today. Is that the case in her native Germany? What's her legacy over there?

People either don't know about her at all – in which case they wonder why I got so fascinated by someone so obscure, or they are shocked by my chutzpah, to tackle such an icon of feminism and peace. Some jaws dropped in Germany, when I said I was writing a novel about Petra Kelly, she is still so revered. However, in general, even in Germany, she is not so well known as she should be.

Did you get any sense of why that is?

Quite frankly, I think it's part of the great historical trend that erases women from history. Away they go, brilliant in their day and vanished 30 years later. We see this in painting, where Renaissance female artists

– sometimes the talk of Rome, Florence or Milan – are now forgotten. We see this in science, and of course in literature. Who knows Lady Murasaki? Yet she wrote the first – and truly great – character-driven novel. And we see this in activism, as Rebecca Solnit has pointed out with such intensity in *Hope in the Dark*.

What was the research process like? Do you speak or read German?

I am learning German but not enough to help me particularly, so I read everything I could get my hands on in English, and also had some important texts translated

I visited Germany and spoke with some of Petra's closest friends and ex-lovers. I listened and took notes, trying to slide my way into understanding her character. I loved watching people's faces as they talked about her – it was clear she was still very alive in their imaginations. I also spent many hours in the Petra Kelly archives in Berlin, which is kept in a brick building with the Heinrich Böll archives.

When I research, I try to follow trails that feel alive, discarding boring factual texts in favour of oral histories, or books with personal vignettes. I love self-published books. Researching fiction is fascinating, because the facts are important, but so is the way a book opens you, or doesn't. Even the feel of a book, the touch of its cover, can make a difference. Some books about growing up in Germany, which I found at the local library, were so intimate. A few had been mimeographed. They helped to open pre-war Dresden, where Helena, one of my characters, grew up. My grandfather, incidentally, was from Dresden. Some of his stories, too, got handed down through my mother, and eventually were transmogrified into Helena's childhood memories.

In *Petra* you artfully and refreshingly avoid a pitfall a lot of authors of historical fiction fall into, which is the tendency to overshare the fruits of one's research labours. Was this something you consciously resisted?

Thank you, Emily. And yes, I was conscious of not weighting the book down with historical plums. I agree that it's easy to tell when a writer has gotten carried away with their research. We might hear a lot about Victorian underwear, for example, or bone buttons. I wanted the book to carry forward through the mounting conflict, and not get too tied up in backwaters of information. I'm actually a huge fan of how Shakespeare does this. Sometimes deep human change – a character actually altering in their psyche, occurs in a single scene (for instance the scene when Iago draws out Othello's jealousy). We watch him morph – at a psychological level – before our eyes.

Guilt, specifically related to wartime atrocities, is a theme here, as it was in your first novel, *Radiance*. Here it shackles Petra's lover, a married ex-Nazi general. Is it guilt, or the dynamic it creates, that interests you?

I don't think in either book I went after themes, per se. I think they came towards me out of the material I'd chosen. With *Petra*, once I took the dive into Germany in the eighties, I was into the huge sea of postwar time guilt, suffering, forgetfulness. And the younger generation staring at the older generation, their fathers and mothers, and asking – with the real outrage of the young – what did you do in the war? This moment in history – as the young insisted on the truth, and the wartime generation faced their own culpability – was just there, once I started to look. My job as a fiction writer was to go under it more. To try to understand the feelings of both generations. And then to dramatize the conflict.

What was the most challenging aspect of writing this novel?

It was challenging to go down and into the psychology of the general. He needed to be likeable, and a good lover for Petra, and his desire for renewal to be genuine. And yet, as the novel progresses, there are actual facts as to what happened between them, which I had to travel toward. This is really in some ways what the whole novel is about. What happens between them? What does Petra cause to happen, because of her particular nature? What was their dark road? And yet, I also wanted the novel to give off some kind of spark at the ending – some kind of extra spark of hope. I'd rewrite from the beginning, hoping for that extra something, and quite a few times I gave up in despair. But in the end, something else did get onto the page, I think. Something I hadn't planned, but which creates a pattern of light as well as darkness.

Forty years ago, Petra Kelly saw humanity as being on the cusp of environmental and nuclear catastrophe. What about her tactics or approach might be relevant to the real catastrophe we're presently facing?

Don't give up! Never give up! I'd say that was one of her messages – but delivered in her classic style, brushing her hair out of her eyes, leaning forward. We must do the best we can, and believe in our own power. That's what I picture her saying. The present world would have appalled her, but it wouldn't have stopped her voice.

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